

Architect Mona Doctor- Pingel,
A Meeting.

A couple of weeks ago, we spent a few days in Auroville, a community par excellence and harmonious beyond the lives we metropolitan citizens end up living. As a student of architecture, we spent some time interacting with Architect Mona Doctor-Pingel. A graduate from CEPT and a Master in Baubiology (Please put those popping eyes back where they belong, I shall be explaining the term a bit later) from Germany she showed us around the work that she has been doing in the past few years in Auroville.

It was an enlightening experience as we ended up interacting with her on a variety of issues, from Architecture, to life in Auroville, which I dare say was alien to us. "Its ok", she said, "people who come to Auroville for the first time generally end up reacting similarly", with an all out smile to comfort our feeling that we really didn't belong where we were, which again turned into a feeling of admiration for the space we had the fortune of inhabiting, even for a small period of time.

Our initial interaction was on the basis of landscaping. Although she isn't formally trained in the subject, it did show in her, that it was an aspect she had passionately worked on in the past to produce astonishing results. She rued, as we spoke to her, that she hadn't been as lucky as we were, in studying a subject such as landscape design at the under graduate level, but again showed with much elegance what self learning can do. I am by no means a critic, for I believe for one to be a critic, one must have more knowledge of a subject that the person he or she puts under the scanner, but I dare say that her work, was astonishing in the more "Aurovillian"

context. I had expressed this to her directly, and would like to express it again, that I'm not so sure what kind of success such artful landscaping would have in the face of sky rocketing land prices and the clients great desire to be utilitarian to an extent that probably the minimalist masters would turn in their graves, but she clarified immediately that she wasn't the architect of plentiful only, but showed us ways to define the landscaping in a place, where each bit of land or volume would be costing the client dear. I can never forget what she said. " Oh what makes you think that landscaping is always about trees and the rocks ? Its beyond that now....", her voice trailing off as she moved from one design to another, leaving us quite moved by such expression.

Her work, is refreshingly original. Her sensitivity to her clients in a community that she had designed, giving each one what they desired in the more artful sense was something that commands respect in an architect. The use of materials, stabilized and burnt bricks in conjunction with each other in spaces and the excellent use of domes and vaults, to such an extent that there remained no roof without one, was quite original and gave us a very organic feel. Another very interesting sight was the small ecological delight of a pond that she had designed, which very interestingly was a very large dish washer ! "I drop in our plates after dinner, with whatever crumbs and grime on them, a light wash with soap in the morning and they are clean as ever...". I must confess, the only thing that came to my mind that instant was, what chemicals does she use here now, only to realize that it was the fishes and the snails ! This small ecological environment she had created was difficult to adjust to for some of us, I mean having fishes and snails eat out of your plate makes it a tad bit difficult for us

metropeds to eat out of them later again. She laughed at this contention again, telling us how adaptable human beings are, pointing at the ceiling showing us the lack of fans there, she made it clear with the smallest of examples that it is a matter of adjustment, where without any formal manner of cleaning plates she had developed a system which would clean things out at the earliest and more efficiently than the soaps and other detergents we end up using at home. Kudos, it was excellent in its inception and use, very little doubt remains in that manner.

"Ummm... Ma'am don't mind us asking, but what is Baubiology?" "The main point about Baubiology", she explained, "is to find the right balance between Man - Nature -Economy that we have lost or are often losing in the modern day living and buildings.". For a someone who comes from life in a mobile phone and computer driven world, this obviously made very little sense to us initially, but her explanation in the matter was to follow. At the end of it, we realized that Baubiology, does have an influence on the human mind and body. She made it clear at the inception of the explanation that in today's world it would be impossible to actually create an environment where we would be able to steer clear of all waveforms, one obviously cannot remain in a "cocoon". But again, she said that these waves were in fact alien to the human body and an overdose of them at times could result in a sort of a malfunction, however small in nature which may end up hurting us. She explained, and very relevantly so, that if not everywhere, then only in the places where people would rejuvenate, i.e. bedrooms etc. it was essential that the human being be affected by the minimal of such radiation.

It exposed us to a different field of design where the building became more than just ro
biology, architecture, and physics.

an envelope for the human body against the weathering elements, to a system which shielded the human being from anything that would potentially harm the human body. Considerably impressed we grew to understand that the human body would in fact react to all that it didn't recognize as natural in some way or the other. "Baubiology", turned out to be a very intricate science which combined sciences such as electro biology, architecture, and physics.

Another technique of construction that she was developing, and which impressed us to no end was the creation of "true domes". The logic, she stated, was simple enough; all domes require some form of ring reinforcement in order to counter the ring stresses that develop at the base of a dome. This reinforcement may be in the form of a ring beam or buttresses, but that is not very cost effective. It is however possible to create domes that follow the natural lines of force, such that, they transfer the load generated by them directly onto the vertical supports and do not require any support in the lateral direction. A revelation nonetheless to us concrete eyed people, it was definitely an enlightening perception of the dome.

Collectively, Ar. Pingel showed us a variety of non conventional ideas, their limits in practicality and how creativity shines above all else, it definitely gave a few of us the confidence that, if you're good, no difficult path is impossible to tread, that you will shine no matter what. Auroville is an experiment as most Aurovillians put it, but again a clichéd description of things summarizes it all, " They're dreamers, and trust me, they're not the only ones...."

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